

LIFE AS WE KNOW IT

They were all there, all the Grand Old Men of the field: McKay, Kliest, Taranto--even Sagan, little more than an ancient withered husk in his electric wheelchair. But the fire still burned in his deep, dark eyes.

All the egos and superegos who had given their lifetimes to the search for extraterrestrial life. Often they had been derided by the media, scorned by the politicians, even scoffed at by their fellow scientists; this was going to be their day. One way or the other.

Jupiter was going to reveal its secrets to them. Today. Life on another world at last. Make or break.

I could feel the tension in the room, like just before a thunderstorm, that electrical smell in the air that makes the hair on your arms stand on end. Careers would be made today, or broken. Mine included. That's why everyone was here, waiting impatiently, chattering nervously, staring at the display screens that still showed nothing but crackling streaks of random noise.

The mission control center was a big room, huge really, but now it was jammed with bodies, hot and sweaty, buzzing with voices in half a dozen languages. The project scientists, all the top government officials, invitees like Sagan, hangers-on who inveigled their way in, everybody who thought or hoped they'd capture some of the glory of the moment, and more than a hundred news reporters and photographers, all crammed into the mission control chamber, all talking at once. Like a tribe of apes, jabbering, gesticulating, posturing to hide their dreams and ambitions and fear.

They didn't want to miss the first images from beneath the cloud tops of Jupiter. Even if it killed them, they had to be at mission control when the probe's first pictures came in.

Most of the reporters clustered around Sagan, of course, although quite a few hung near Lopez-Oyama, the center's director. Our boss.

Beautiful Allie stayed at Lopez-Oyama's side. Allison Brandt, she of the golden hair and pendulous breasts. I dreamed about Allie, saw her flawlessly naked, smiling at me willingly. In my waking hours I thought about her endlessly, picturing myself doing things with her that not even my dreams dared to imagine.

But she stayed beside the director, next to the power and the attention. I was merely an engineer, neither powerful nor glamorous. Still, I longed for Allie. Lusted after her. Even as she smiled for the photographers I noticed how she had artfully undone an extra couple of buttons on the front of her blouse.

"Imagery systems check," droned the voice of the mission controller. The huge room fell absolutely silent. I held my breath.

"Imagery systems functioning."

We all let out a sigh of relief. Me especially. The imagery systems were my responsibility. I built them. If they failed, the mission failed, I failed, six dozen careers would go down the tubes, six dozen frustrated scientists would be seeking my blood.

Our probe into Jupiter was unmanned, of course. No astronaut could survive the crushing pressures and turbulent storms beneath the cloud deck of Jupiter. No one knew if our robotic probe was sturdy enough to reach below the cloud tops

and survive.

Over the years, the earlier probes had shown that beneath those gaudy colorful swirling clouds there was an ocean ten times larger than the whole Earth. An ocean of water. Heavily laced with ammonia, to be sure, but water nonetheless. There was only one other world in the solar system where liquid water existed -- Earth. We knew that liquid water meant life on Earth.

Did it on Jupiter?

"Jupiter represents our best chance for finding extraterrestrial life." Lopez-Oyama had said those words to the congressional committee that ruled on NASA's budget, when he went begging to them for the money to fund our mission.

"Life?" asked one of the Congressmen, looking startled, almost afraid. "Like animals and trees and such?"

I watched those hearings on TV; we all did, sitting on the edges of our chairs in the center's cafeteria while the politicians decided if we lived or died. I had picked a seat next to Allie, although she barely acknowledged my presence beside her. She stared unwaveringly at the screen.

With a tolerant little shake of his head, Lopez-Oyama replied, "It probably won't be life as we know it here on Earth, sir. That would be too much to hope for."

"Then what will it be like?"

"We just don't know. We've never found life on another world before." Then he added, "But if we don't find life on Jupiter, then I doubt that life of any form exists anywhere else in the solar system."

"Do you mean intelligent life?" asked the committee chairwoman sharply.

Lopez-Oyama smiled winningly at her. "No, ma'am," he said. "Intelligent life would be too much to expect. I'll be happy if we find something like bacteria."

Now, as the moment of truth approached, the scientists cramming mission control were busily spinning theories about what the cameras would find in Jupiter's global ocean. They couldn't wait for the actual pictures, they had to show how clever they were to impress the reporters and each other. A bunch of alpha male apes, preening and displaying their brains instead of their fangs. Competing for primacy and the attention of the news reporters who were clustered around them, goggle-eyed, tape recorders spinning. Even the women scientists were playing the one-upmanship game, in the name of equality.

To her credit, Allie remained quiet. She was as clever a scientist as any of them, but she refused to involve herself in the primate competition. She didn't have to. Her ranking in the hierarchy was as secure as could be.

None of them paid the slightest attention to me. I was only the engineer who had built the imaging system. I wasn't a scientist, just the guy with dirt under his fingernails who made the machinery work. I'd be ignored unless something went wrong.

To tell the truth, I paid damned little attention to them and their constant gobbling. My eyes were focused on long-legged Allie, by far the most desirable female in the pack. How could I make her notice me? How could I get her to smile in my direction instead of clinging so close to the boss? How could I get to be

an alpha male in her lustrous eyes?

"Data coming through."

From nearly a thousand million kilometers away, my cameras were functioning. Had already functioned, as a matter of fact, more than ten hours ago. It took that long for the telemetry signal to travel from Jupiter to our antennas out in the desert.

Suddenly all their jabbering stopped. Mission control fell absolutely silent. The first images began to raster across the main display screens, line by line. Live, from beneath the endless cloud deck of Jupiter.

Each display screen showed imagery from a different wavelength. We had blue, green, red, infrared and even radar imaging systems. Despite all their theories, none of the scientists had been able to tell me which wavelengths would work best beneath Jupiter's cloud deck.

I had asked them how much sunlight filtered through the clouds. None of them could tell me. Which wavelengths of sunlight penetrated the clouds? None of them knew. I had to grope blindly and include as broad a spectrum of instruments as possible.

Now I swivelled my gaze from one screen to the next. The blue system was pretty much of a washout, nothing but a blur, as I had expected. The atmosphere must be filled with haze, a planet-wide fog of ammonia and sulfur molecules.

"That looks like wave tops!"

The infrared image indeed looked as if it was plunging toward the surface of a turbulent ocean. Radar showed more detail. Waves, crests and troughs racing madly across the screen. A rough sea down there. A very turbulent, storm-tossed ocean.

"Immersion in three minutes," said mission control. The probe was going to hit those waves. It was designed to sink slowly to a depth of about a hundred kilometers, where it would -- we hoped -- attain a neutral buoyancy and float indefinitely.

Of course, if we saw something interesting at a shallower depth the probe could eject some of its ballast on command and rise accordingly. The trouble was that it took more than ten hours for any of our commands to reach the probe. We had to pray that whatever we found wouldn't go away in the course of ten hours-- just about a full revolution of the planet, a whole Jovian day.

I summoned up all my courage and sidled closer to Allie, squeezing slowly through the crush of bodies. They were all staring at the screens, ignoring me, watching the ocean waves and the streams of low-level clouds streaking past. Storm clouds, swirling viciously.

I pushed between Allie and Lopez-Oyama. Not daring to try to say anything to her, I looked down on the boss's balding pate and half-whispered, "I didn't think we'd get much from the blue at this level."

He was so short that he had to crane his neck to look at me. He said nothing just nodded in his inscrutable way.

Allie was almost my own height. We were nearly eye to eye.

"The infrared is fabulous," she said. To me!

"It is working pretty well, isn't it?" Be modest in triumph. All the books of advice I had studied told me that women appreciated men who were successful, yet not boastful; strong but sensitive.

"It won't work as well once it's underwater, though, will it?" she asked.

I suppressed the urge to grab her and carry her off. Instead, I deliberately turned to look at the screens instead of her cool hazel eyes.

"That's when the blue or blue-green should come into its own," I said, trying to keep my voice from trembling.

"If the laser works," said Lopez-Oyama. It was almost a growl. He was distinctly unhappy that I had stepped between him and Allie.

Mission control announced, "Impact in ten seconds."

The whole crowd seemed to surge forward slightly, lean toward the screens, waiting.

"Impact!"

All the screens went blank for a heart-stopping instant. But before anyone could shout or groan or even take a breath, they came on again. Radar was blank, of course, and the infrared was just a smudge. But the blue and blue-green images were clear and beautiful.

"My god, it's like scuba diving in Hawaii," Allie said.

That's how crisp and clear the pictures were. We could see bubbles from our splash-in and light filtering down from the ocean's surface. The water looked crystal clear.

And empty. No fish, no fronds of vegetation, nothing that looked like life in that ammonia-laced water, nothing at all to be seen.

"Not deep enough yet," grumbled Lopez-Oyama. If we found nothing his career was finished, we all knew that. I caught a glimpse of the congressional committee chairwoman, up in the special VIP section behind plate glass windows, staring hard at him.

For more than an hour we saw nothing but bubbles from the probe's descent. The faint light from the surface dwindled, as we had expected. At precisely the pre-programmed moment, the laser turned on and began sweeping its intense light through the water.

"That should attract anything that can swim," Allie said hopefully.

"Or repel anything that's accustomed to swimming in darkness," said one of the scientists, almost with a smirk.

The laser beam ballooned in the water, of course. I had expected that; counted on it, really. It acted as a bright wide searchlight for me. I wanted to tell Allie why I had chosen that specific wavelength, how proud I was that it was working just as I had planned it would.

But her attention was riveted to the screen, and Lopez-Oyama pushed to her side

again, squeezing me out from between them.

Lopez-Oyama was perspiring. I could see drops of sweat glistening on his bald spot.

"Deeper," he muttered. "We've got to go deeper. The ocean is heated from below. Life forms must be down there."

I thought I heard a slightly desperate accent on the word "must."

"Spectrographic data coming in," announced mission control.

All eyes turned to the screen that began to show the smears and bands of colors from the probe's mass spectrometer. All eyes except mine. I kept my attention on the images from the laser-illuminated sea. They were becoming cloudy, it seemed to me.

"There's the ammonia band," someone said.

"And carbon compounds, I think."

"My god, those are organics!"

"Organic compounds in the water!"

"Life."

"Don't jump to conclusions," Lopez-Oyama warned. But his voice was shaking with excitement.

Allie actually clutched at my shoulder. "Can your cameras see anything?"

The water was cloudy, murky, even where the laser beam swept through; it looked like a thin fog, glistening but obscuring.

"The ocean's filled with organic chemicals at this level," one of the scientists said.

"Particles," corrected another scientist.

"Food," somebody quipped.

"For who?"

"Deeper," Sagan said, his voice surprisingly strong. "The organic particles are drifting downward. If there's anything in that ocean that eats them, it's down at a deeper level."

The probe was designed to attain neutral buoyancy at a depth of a hundred kilometers. We were approaching that depth now. It might not be enough.

"How deep can we push it?" Lopez-Oyama asked no one in particular.

Immediately a dozen opinions sprang out of the eager, excited, sweaty chattering apes. Earlier probes had been crushed like soda cans by the immense pressure of the Jovian ocean. But I knew that the probe's limits were not only structural, but communications-based. The probe could not hold more than a hundred kilometers of the hair-thin optical fiber that carried its comm signals to the surface of the ocean. So even if it could survive lower depths, we would lose

touch with it.

"What's that?"

In the hazy light, a dark shape drifted by, too distant to make out any detail.

"Follow it!" Lopez-Oyama snapped.

Then his face reddened. It would take some ten hours for his order to reach the probe. In his excitement he had forgotten.

Allie turned to me. "Are the close-up cameras working?"

They were. I gestured toward the screens that showed their imagery. The dark hulk, whatever it was, had not come within the narrow focus of either of the close-view cameras. Both screens showed nothing but the cloudy water, tinted sickly green by the laser light.

"Another one!" somebody shouted.

This time the shape drifted past the view of one of the close-up cameras, briefly. We saw a bulbous dark dome, almost spherical, with snake-like appendages dangling from its bottom.

"Tentacles!"

"It's an animal! Like an octopus!"

I scanned the numerical data on the bottom of the screen. The object, whatever it was, was three and a half kilometers from the probe. And it was four hundred and thirty-two meters long, from the top of its dome to the tip of its tentacles. Huge. Fifteen times bigger than a blue whale. Immense.

"It's not moving."

"It's drifting in the current."

"The tentacles are just hanging there. No activity that I can see."

"Conserving energy?"

"Maybe that's the way it hunts for prey."

"Trolling?"

It looked dead to me. Inert. Unmoving. It drifted out of the close-up camera's view and all the heads in the room swivelled to the wide-angle view. The dark lump did nothing to show it might be alive.

"What's the spectrograph show?"

"Not a helluva lot."

"Absorption bands, lots of them."

"Chlorophyll?"

"Don't be a butthead!"

Allie was the only one who seemed to realize the significance of what we were seeing. "If it's an animal, it's either in a quiescent, resting phase . . . or it's dead."

"The first extraterrestrial creature we find and it's dead," somebody grouched.

"There'll be more," said Lopez-Oyama, almost cheerfully.

I looked across the room at Sagan. He was leaning forward in his wheelchair, eyes intent on the screens, as if he could make something more appear just by concentrating. The reporters were gaping, not saying a word for a blessed change, forgetting to ask questions while the underwater views of the Jovian ocean filled the display screens.

Then I looked at Allie again. Her lovely face was frozen in an expression of . . . what? Fear? Dread? Did she have the same terrible suspicion that was building in my mind?

It was almost another hour before we saw another of the tentacled creatures. The probe had reached its maximum depth and was drifting through the murky water. Particles floated past the cameras, some of them as big as dinner plates. None of them active. They all just drifted by, sinking slowly like dark chunks of soot meandering toward the bottom of that sunless sea.

Then we saw the second of the octopods. And quickly afterward, an entire school of them, hundreds, perhaps a thousand or more. The sensors on the probe went into overdrive; the automatic analysis programs would count the creatures for us. We simply stared at them.

Different sizes. Lots of small ones-- if something a dozen times the size of a whale can be called small.

"Babies," Allie murmured.

A family group, I thought. A clan. All of them dead. There was no mistaking it now. My cameras showed them clearly. Big saucer eyes clouded and unmoving. Open wounds in some of them. Tentacles hanging limply. They were just drifting along like ghosts, immense dark shadows that once had been alive.

Time lost all meaning for us. The big mission control center fell absolutely silent. Even the most assertive and egocentric of the male apes among us stopped trying to make instant theories and simply stared at a scene of devastation. A holocaust.

At last Lopez-Oyama whispered, "They're all dead. The whole fucking planet's dead."

Then we saw the city. A sort of collective gasp went through the crowded mission control room when it came into view.

It was a structure, a vast, curving structure that floated in that mighty ocean, graceful despite its immense size. Curves atop curves. Huge round ports and beautifully symmetrical archways, a gigantic city built by or for the immense creatures that floated, dead and decaying, before our camera eyes.

The numbers flickering at the bottom of the screens told us that the city was hundreds of kilometers away from our lenses, yet it filled the screens of the narrow-view cameras. We could see delicate traceries along its massive curving flank, curves and whorls etched into its structure.

"Writing," someone breathed.

A dream city, built of alien inspirations and desires. It staggered our earthbound senses, dwarfed us with its immensity and grandeur. It was enormous yet graceful and entirely beautiful in an eerie, unearthly way. It was dead.

As it swung slowly, majestically, in the powerful ocean currents we saw that it was only a fragment of the original structure, a piece somehow torn off from its original whole. Jagged cracks and ragged edges showed where it had been ripped away from the rest of the city. To me it looked like a fragment of an enormous Easter egg shell, beautifully decorated, that had been smashed by some titanic unseen malevolency.

"War?" someone's voice whispered plaintively. "Did they destroy themselves?"

But I knew better. And I couldn't stand it. I turned away from the screens, away from the views of dead Jupiter, and pushed through the crowd that was still gaping stupidly at my cameras' views. I was suffocating strangling. I had to have fresh air or die.

I bolted out the main doors and into the corridor, empty and silent, deserted by all the people who had crammed mission control. The first outside door I could find I kicked through, heedless of the red EMERGENCY ONLY sign and the wailing alarm that hooted accusingly after me.

The brilliant late afternoon sun surprised me, made my eyes suddenly water after the cool shadows inside the building. I took in a deep raw lungful of hot, dry desert air. It felt like brick dust, alien, as if part of me were still deeply immersed in Jupiter's mighty ocean.

"It's all Mined." Allie's voice.

Turning I saw that she had followed me. The tears in her eyes were not from the bright sunshine.

"All dead," she sobbed. "The city . . . all of them . . . destroyed."

"The comet," I said. Shoemaker-Levy 9 had struck Jupiter twenty years ago with the violence of a million hydrogen bombs.

"Twenty years," Allie moaned. "They were intelligent. We could have communicated with them!"

If we had only been twenty years earlier, I thought. Then the true horror of it struck me. What could we have told them, twenty years ago? That a shattered comet was going to rain destruction on them? That no matter what they had built, what they had learned or hoped for or prayed to, their existence was going to be wiped out forever? That there was absolutely nothing either they or we could do about it?

"It's cold," Allie said, almost whimpering.

She wanted me to go to her, to hold her, to comfort her the way one warm-blooded primate ape comforts another. But what was the use? What was the use of anything?

What difference did any of it make in a world where you could spend millions of years evolving into intelligence, build a civilization, reach a peak of

knowledge where you begin to study and understand the universe around you, only to learn that the universe can destroy you utterly, without remorse, without the slightest shred of hope for salvation?

I looked past Allie, shivering in the last rays of the dying day. Looked past the buildings and antennas, past the gray-brown hills and the distant wrinkled mountains that were turning blood red in the inevitable sunset.

I saw Jupiter. I saw those intelligent creatures wiped away utterly and implacably, as casually as a man flicks a spot of dust off his sleeve.

And I knew that somewhere out in that uncaring sky another comet was heading inexorably for Earth to end all our dreams, all our strivings, all our desires.

REMEMBER, CAESAR ...

We have never renounced the use of terror.
-- Vladimir Ilyich Lenin

She was alone and she was scared.

Apara Jaheen held her breath as the two plainclothes security guards walked past her. They both held ugly, deadly black machine pistols casually in their hands as they made their rounds along the corridor.

They can't see you, Apara told herself. You're invisible.

Still, she held her breath.

She knew that her stealth suit shimmered ever so slightly in the glareless light from the fluorescents that lined the ceiling of the corridor. You had to be looking for that delicate little ripple in the air, actively seeking it, to detect it at all. And even then you would think it was merely a trick your eyes played on you, a flicker that was gone before it even registered consciously in your mind.

And yet Apara froze, motionless, not daring to breathe, until the two men -- smelling of cigarettes and after-shave lotion -- passed her and were well down the corridor. They were talking about the war, betting that it would be launched before the week was out.

Her stealth suit's surface was honeycombed with microscopic fiber optic vidcams and pixels that were only a couple of molecules thick. The suit hugged Apara's lithe body like a famished lover. Directed by the computer built into her helmet, the vidcams scanned her surroundings and projected the imagery onto the pixels.

It was the closest thing to true invisibility that the Cabal's technology had been able to come up with. So close that, except for the slight unavoidable glitter when the sequin-like pixels caught some stray light, Apara literally disappeared into the background.

Covering her from head to toe, the suit's thermal absorption layer kept her infrared profile vanishingly low and its insulation subskin held back the minuscule electromagnetic fields it generated. The only way they could detect her would be if she stepped into a scanning beam, but the wide-spectrum goggles she wore should reveal them to her in plenty of time to avoid them.

She hoped.

Getting into the president's mansion had been ridiculously easy. As instructed, she had waited until dark before leaving the Cabal's safe house in the miserable slums of the city. Her teammates drove her as close to the presidential mansion as they dared in a dilapidated, nondescript faded blue sedan that would draw no attention. They wished her success as she slipped out of the car, invisible in her stealth suit.

"For the Cause," Ahmed said, almost fiercely, to the empty air where he thought she was.

"For the Cause," Apara repeated, knowing that she might never see him again.

Tingling with apprehension, Apará hurried across the park that fronted the mansion, unseen by the evening strollers and beggars, then climbed onto the trunk of one of the endless stream of limousines that entered the grounds. She passed the perimeter guard posts unnoticed.

She rode on the limo all the way to the mansion's main entrance. While a pair of bemedaled generals got out of the limousine and walked crisply past the saluting uniformed guards, Apará melted back into the shadows, away from the lights of the entrance, and took stock of the situation.

The guards at the big, open double doors wore splendid uniforms and shouldered assault rifles. And were accompanied by dogs: two big German shepherds who sat on their haunches, tongues lolling, ears laid back.

Will they smell me if I try to go through the doors? Apará asked herself. Muldoon and his technicians claimed that the insulated stealth suit protected her even from giving off a scent. They were telling the truth, as they knew it, of course. But were they right?

If she were caught, she knew her life would be over. She would simply disappear, a prisoner of their security apparatus. They would use drugs to drain her of every scrap of information she possessed. They would not have to kill her afterward; her mind would be gone by then. Standing in the shadows, invisible yet frightened, she tongued the cyanide capsule lodged between her upper right wisdom tooth and cheek. This is a volunteer mission, Muldoon had told her. You've got to be willing to give your life for the Cause.

Apará was willing, yet the fear still rose in her throat, hot and burning.

Born in the slums of Beirut to a mother who abandoned her and a father she never knew, she had understood from childhood that her life was worthless. Even the name they had given her, Apará, meant literally "born to die."

It was during her teen years, when she had traded her body for life itself, for food and protection against the marauding street gangs who raped and murdered for the thrill of it, that she began to realize that life was pointless, existence was pain, the sooner death took her the sooner she would be safe from all fear.

Then Ahmed entered her life and showed her that there was more to living than waiting for death. Strike back! he told her. If you must give up your life, give it for something worthwhile. Even we who are lost and miserable can accomplish something with our lives. We can change the world!

Ahmed introduced her to the Cabal, and the Cabal became her family, her teacher, her purpose for breathing.

For the first time in her short life, Apará felt worthwhile. The Cabal flew her across the ocean, to the United States of America, where she met the pink-faced Irishman who called himself Muldoon and was entrusted with her mission to the White House. And decked in the stealth suit, a cloak of invisibility, just like the magic of old Baghdad in the time of Scheherazade and the Thousand and One Nights.

You can do it, she told herself as she clung to the shadows outside the White House's main entrance. They are all counting on you: Muldoon and his technicians and Ahmed, with his soulful eyes and tender dear hands.

When the next limousine disgorged its passengers, a trio of admirals, Apará sucked in a deep breath and walked in with them, past the guards and the dogs. One of the animals perked up its ears and whined softly as she marched in step behind the admirals, but other than that heart-stopping instant she had no trouble getting inside the White House. The guard shushed the animal, gruffly.

She followed the trio of admirals out to the west wing, and down the stairs to the basement level and a long, narrow corridor. At its end, Apará could see, was a security checkpoint with a metal detector like the kind used at airports, staffed by two women in uniform. Both of them were African-Americans.

She stopped and faded back against the wall as the admirals stepped through the metal detector, one by one. The guards were lax, expecting no trouble. After all, only the president's highest and most trusted advisors were allowed here.

Then the two plainclothes guards walked past her, openly displaying their machine pistols and talking about the impending war.

"You think they're really gonna do it?"

"Don't see why not. Hit 'em before they start some real trouble. Don't wait for the mess to get worse."

"Yeah, I guess so."

They walked down the corridor as far as the checkpoint, chatted briefly with the female guards, then came back, passing Apará again, still talking about the possibility of war.

Apará knew that she could not get through the metal detector without setting off its alarm. The archway-like device was sensitive not only to metals, but sniffed for explosives and x-rayed each person stepping through it. She was invisible to human eyes but the x-ray camera would see her clearly.

She waited, hardly breathing, until the next clutch of visitors arrived. Civilians, this time. Steeling herself, Apará followed them up to the checkpoint and waited as they stopped at the detector and handed their wristwatches, coins, and belts to the women on duty, then stepped through the detector, single-file.

Timing was important. As the last of the civilians started through, holding his briefcase in front of his chest, as instructed, Apará dropped flat on her stomach and slithered across the archway like a snake speeding after its prey. Carefully avoiding the man's feet, she got through the detector just before he did.

The x-rays did not reach the floor, she had been told. She hoped it was true.

The alarm buzzer sounded. Apará, on the far side of the detector now, sprang to her feet.

"Hold it, sir," said one of the uniformed guards. "The metal detector went off."

He looked annoyed. "I gave you everything. Don't tell me the damned machine picked up the hinges on my briefcase."

The woman shrugged. "Would you mind stepping through again, sir, please?"

With a huff, the man ducked back through the doorway, still clutching his

briefcase, and then stepped through once more. No alarm.

"Satisfied?" he sneered.

"Yes, sir. Thank you," the guard said tonelessly.

"Happens now and then," said her partner as she handed the man back his watch, belt and change. "Beeps for no reason."

"Machines aren't perfect," the man muttered.

"I guess," said the guard.

"Too much iron in your blood, Marty," joked one of the other men.

Apara followed them down the corridor, feeling immensely relieved. As far as her information went, there were no further security checkpoints. Unless she bumped into someone, or her suit somehow failed, she was safe.

Until she tried to get out of the White House. But that wouldn't happen until she had fulfilled her mission. If they caught her then, she would simply bite on the cyanide capsule, knowing that she had struck her blow for the Cause.

She followed the civilians into a spacious conference room dominated by a long, polished mahogany table. Most of the high-backed leather chairs were already occupied, mainly by men in military uniforms. There were more stars around the table than in a desert sky, Apara thought. One bomb in here and the U.S. military establishment would be decapitated, along with most of the cabinet heads.

She pressed her back against the bare wall next to the door as the latest arrivals went around the table, shaking hands.

They chatted idly for several minutes, a dozen different conversations buzzing around the long table. Then the president entered from the far door and they all snapped to their feet.

"Sit down, gentlemen," said the president. "And ladies," she added, smiling at the three female cabinet members who sat together at one side of the table.

The president looked older in person than she did on television, Apara thought. She was not wearing so much makeup, of course. Still, the president looked vigorous and determined, her famous green eyes sweeping the table as she took her chair at its head. For an instant those eyes looked directly at Apara, and her heart stopped. But the moment passed. The president could not see Apara any more than the others could.

The president's famous smile was absent as she sat down. Looking directly at the chairman of the joint chiefs, she asked the general, "Well, are we ready?"

"In twenty-four hours," he replied crisply. "Troop deployment is complete, the naval task force is on station and our full complement of planes is on site, ready to go."

"Then why do we need twenty-four hours?" the president demanded.

The general's silver eyebrows rose a centimeter. "Logistics, ma'am. Getting ammunition and fuel to the front-line units, setting our communications codes. Strictly routine, but very important if we want the attack to come off without a

hitch."

The president was not pleased. "Every hour we delay means more pressure from the U.N."

"And from the Europeans," said one of the civilians. Apará recognized him as the secretary of defense.

"The French are complaining again?"

"They've never stopped complaining, madam president. Now they've got the Russians joining the chores. They've asked for an emergency meeting of NATO."

"Not the general assembly?"

The secretary of defense almost smiled. "No, ma'am. Even the French realize that the U.N. can't stop us."

A murmur of suppressed laughter rippled along the table. Apará felt anger. These people used the United Nations when it suited them, and ignored the U.N. otherwise.

The secretary of state, sitting at her right hand, was a thickset older man with a heavy thatch of gray hair that flopped stubbornly over his forehead. He held up a blunt-fingered hand and the table fell silent.

"I must repeat, madam president," he said in a grave, dolorous voice, "that we have not yet exhausted all our diplomatic and economic options. Military force should be our last choice, after all other possibilities have been foreclosed, not our first choice."

"We don't have time for that," snapped the secretary of defense. "And those people don't respect anything but force, anyway."

"I disagree," said state. "Our U.N. ambassador tells me that they are willing to allow the United Nations to arbitrate our differences."

"The United Nations," the president muttered.

"As an honest broker--"

"Yeah, and we'll be the honest brokee," one of the admirals wisecracked. Everyone around the table laughed.

Then the president said, "Our U.N. ambassador is a well-known weak sister. Why do you think I put him there in New York, Carlos, instead of giving him your portfolio?"

The secretary of state was not deterred. "Invading a sovereign nation is a serious decision. American soldiers and aircrew will be killed."

The president glared at him. "All right, Carlos, you've made your point. Now let's get on with it."

One of the admirals said, "We're ready with the nuclear option, if and when it's needed."

"Good," snapped the president.

And on it went, for more than an hour. The fundamentalist regime of Iran was going to be toppled by American military power. Its infiltration of other Moslem nations would end, its support of international terrorism would be wiped out.

Terrorism, Apará growled silently. They speak of using nuclear weapons and they call the Iranians terrorists.

And what am I? she asked herself. What is the Cabal and the Cause we fight for? What other weapons do we have except terror? How can we straggle for a just world, a world free of domination, unless we use terror? We have no armies, no fleets of ships or planes. Despite the lies their media publish, we have no nuclear weapons and we would not use them if we did.

Apará felt sure of that. The guiding precept of the Cause was to strike at the leaders of oppression and aggression. Why kill harmless women and children? Why strike the innocent? Or even the soldiers who merely carry out the orders of their leaders?

Strike the leaders! Put terror in their hearts. That was the strategy of the Cabal, the goal of the Cause.

Brave talk, Apará thought. Tonight we will see if it works. Apará glided along the wall until she was standing behind the president. She looked down at the woman's auburn hair, so perfectly curled and tinted. The president's fingernails were perfect, too: shaped and colored beautifully. She's never chipped a nail by doing hard work, Apará thought.

I could kill her now and it would look to them as if she had been struck down by god.

But her orders were otherwise. Apará waited.

The meeting broke up at last with the president firmly deciding to launch the attack within twenty-four hours.

"Tell me the instant everything's ready to go," she said to the chairman of the joint chiefs.

"Yes, ma'am," he said. "We'll need your positive order at that point."

"You'll get it."

She rose from her chair and they all got to their feet. Like a ghost, Apará followed the president through the door into a little sitting room, where two more uniformed security guards snapped to attention.

They accompanied her down the corridor to the main section of the mansion and left her at the elevator that went up to the living quarters on the top floor. Apará climbed the stairs; the elevator was too small. She feared the president would sense her presence in its cramped confines.

Unseen, unsensed, Apará tiptoed through the broad upstairs hallway with its golden carpet and spacious windows at either end. There were surveillance cameras discreetly placed up by the ceiling, but otherwise no obvious security up at this level -- except the electronic sensors on the windows, of course.

The president lived alone here, except for her personal servants. Her husband had died years earlier, during her election campaign, in an airplane crash that won her a huge sympathy vote.

Apara loitered in the hallway, not daring to rest on one of the plush couches lining the walls, until a servant bearing a tray with a silver carafe and bottles of pills entered the president's bedroom. Apara slipped in behind her.

The black woman turned her head, frowning slightly, as if she heard a movement behind her or felt a breath on the back of her neck. Apara froze for a moment, then edged away as the woman reached for the door and closed it.

The president was showering, judging by the sounds coming from the bathroom. Legs aching from being on her feet for so many hours, Apara went to the far window and glanced out at the darkened garden, then turned back to watch the servant deposit the tray on the president's night table and leave the room, silent and almost as unnoticed as Apara herself.

There was one wooden chair in the bedroom and Apara sat on it gratefully, knowing that she would leave no telltale indentation on its hard surface. She felt very tired, sleepy. The adrenalin had drained out of her during the long meeting downstairs. She hoped the president would finish her shower and get into bed and go to sleep quickly.

It was not to be. The president came out of the bathroom soon enough, but she sat up in bed and read for almost another hour before finally putting down the paperback novel and reaching for the pills on the night table. One, two, three different pills she took, with sips of water or whatever was in the carafe the servant had left.

At last the president sank back on her pillows, snapped her fingers to turn off the lights, and closed her eyes. Apara waited the better part of another hour before stirring off the chair. She had to be certain that the president was truly, deeply asleep.

Slowly she walked to the side of the bed. She stared at the woman lying there, straining to hear the rhythm of her breathing through the insulated helmet.

Deep, slow breaths. She's really sleeping, Apara decided. If the thought of invading another country and killing thousands of people bothered her, she gave no indication of it. Maybe the pills she took helped her to sleep. She must have some qualms about what she was going to do.

Apara realized she was the one with the qualms. I can leave her here and get out of the mansion undetected, she told herself.

And the Cause, the purpose of her life, would evaporate like dew in the hot desert sun. Muldoon would be despairing, Ahmed so furious that he would never speak to her again. They would know she was unreliable, a risk to their own safety.

Strike! she told herself. They are all counting on you. Everything depends on you.

She struck.

By seven-fifteen the next morning the White House was surrounded by an armed cordon of U.S. Marines. No one was allowed onto the grounds, no one was allowed to leave the mansion.

Apara had already left; she simply walked out with the cleaning crew, a few minutes after five A.M.

The president summoned her secretary of state to the oval office at eight sharp. It was early for him, and he had to pass through the gauntlet of Marines as well as the regular guards and secret service agents. He stared in wonder as more Marines, in their colorful full-dress uniforms, stood in place of the usual servants.

"What's going on?" he asked the president when he was finally ushered into the oval office.

She looked ghastly: her face was gray, her eyes darting nervously. She clutched a thin scrap of paper in one hand.

"Never mind," the president said curtly. "Sit down."

The secretary of state sat in front of her desk. He himself felt blearyeyed and rumped, this early in the morning.

Without preamble, the president asked, "Carlos, do you seriously think we can settle this crisis without a military strike?"

The secretary of state looked surprised, but he quickly regained his wits. "I've been trying to tell you that for the past six weeks, Alicia."

"You think diplomacy can get us what we want."

"Diplomacy and economic pressures, yes. We can even get the United Nations on our side, if we call off this military strike. It's not too late, you know."

The president leaned back in her chair, fiddling with that scrap of paper, trying to keep her hands from trembling. Unwilling to allow her secretary of state to see how upset she was, she swiveled around to look out the long windows at the springtime morning. Birds chirped happily among the flowers.

"All right," she said, her mind made up. "Tell Muldoon to ask for an emergency session of the Security Council. That's what he's been after all along."

A boyish grin broke across the secretary of state's normally dour face. "I'll phone him right now. He's still in New York."

"Do that," said the president. Then she added, "From your own office."

"Yes, ma'am!"

The secretary of state trotted off happily, leaving the president alone at her desk in the oval office. With the note still clutched in her shaking hand.

I'll put the entire White House staff through the wringer, she said to herself. Every damned one of them. Interrogate them until their brains are fried. I'll find out who's responsible for this...this...

She shuddered involuntarily.

They got into my bedroom. My own bedroom! Who did it? How many people in this house are plotting against me?

They could have killed me!

I'll turn the note over to the secret service. No, they screwed up. If they were

doing their job right this would never have happened. The attorney general. Give it to the F.B.I. They'll find the culprit.

Her hands were shaking so badly she could hardly read the note.

Remember Caesar, thou art dust.

That's all the note said. Yet it struck terror into her heart. They could have killed me. This was just a warning. They could have killed me just as easily as leaving this warning on my pillow.

For the first time in her life, she felt afraid.

She looked around the oval office, at the familiar trappings of power, and felt afraid. It's like being haunted, she said to herself.

In his apartment in New York, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations nodded as he spoke to the president's security advisor.

"That's good news, Carlos!" said Herbert Muldoon, with a hint of Irish lilt in his voice. "Excellent news. I'm sure the president's made the right choice."

He cut the connection with Washington and immediately punched up the number of the U.N.'s secretary general, thinking as his fingers tapped on the keyboard:

It worked! Apará did the job. Now we'll have to send her to Tehran. And others, too, of course. The mullahs may be perfectly willing to send young assassins to their deaths, but I wonder how they'll react when they know they're the ones being targeted.

We'll find out soon.

